

CARDINAL DIRECTION*

Siobhan Cooney FICTION

Shutting the heavy wooden door behind him, Father Dominic adjusted the folds of his purple vestments and lowered himself onto the bench of the Confessional. He held tight to the solid mahogany. The aches and creaks of the old structure echoed off the walls of the empty Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church with a faint moan. The absence of warm parishioners left a bitter chill in the air, but outside was hardly different. Even in late February, the town was trapped in the last throes of winter.

Father Dominic rubbed his hands together, rough and hewn from decades of beseeching prayer and bearing the burden of the sacred word, leather-bound like the soles of his humble shoes. They were soles that had been worn from following his faith across continents to administer to the physically and spiritually sick, giving absolutions at the unyielding will of his master. He was younger then. Now, after thirty years of servitude and twice that amount in pounds that his robes failed to conceal, he was tired.

Rust-induced creaking from the hinges of the adjacent door signaled to Father Dominic that a parishioner of was ready to be absolved. The parishioner's voice fumbled through the lattice that separated their two alcoves.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," he said.

That Brooklyn brogue, that slight hesitation in the middle of the opening prayer while he caught his breath. It's Tony, no—Tommy Shepherd, back again to repent for losing his temper at his wife and sons. Father Dominic once heard another priest say that the repeat offenders are the worst because they never seem to learn. But Father Dominic thought the contrary. Only the faithful sin the same way twice. At least they have some sense of direction, or focus. To him, it meant that they only screwed up in one area of their life, and that they made up for it everywhere else.

Try as he did, Father Dominic could not bring himself to listen to Tommy drone about how he couldn't help himself from yelling when his wife was talking too loud on the phone with her women's club. After all, the big game was on TV. Or how Tommy's boys got into a fistfight over the last slice of pizza, and even Father Dominic himself would have broken his diplomatic silence to let off some steam.

Instead, the priest let his thoughts drift back to this morning's unsettling breakfast in the rectory, where the radio reported the latest numbers from the CDC about virus-related deaths, and the unemployment rate acting like mercury in a thermometer on a hot day. No one could

manage to scrape together a few extra contributions to the parish food pantry. It haunted him as he finished his oatmeal and terrorized his thoughts during service. By day he stood before the masses at his church, preaching the words that merely passed over his lips when he yearned to kneel amongst the flock, shoulder to shoulder with those who also needed guidance. By night he tossed sleeplessly under his thin bedsheets, watching the light replace the darkness but not feeling illuminated.

A sigh slithered out. He removed his horn-rimmed spectacles to rub his fatigued eyes with trembling, corrugated fingers. *How could a loving God allow his creation to fall into such utter turmoil?*

Tommy stopped mid-sentence, something about the President's recent address that really got him going the other night. "I'm sorry, Father, what was that?"

Father Dominic shook his head, cleared his throat. "Ten Hail Mary's and your soul shall be forgiven...and kiss your kids tonight. Tell Samantha she's beautiful."

Another cry erupted from the neglected hinges. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned," said a woman's voice.

Though he felt tempted to nod off, there was something about her flowery lilt that shook him awake and reminded the gentle priest of a sunny yet silhouetted figure from his past. Dominic returned to a period of time he had lost but not yet forgotten. They would picnic and play guitar, sweating under the sun, and praying in the moonlight, wrapped in each other's arms. His lovely Linda. Her love coated his heart in a layer of sweet honey. But it had hardened into a crackling shell. It's because of this emptiness that he could only listen to the problems of parenthood instead of living them. Dominic couldn't remember his days with Linda individually; they all ran together. The images that passed through his head like a reel of film made him feel warm, but they were shadowed in his mind. He hated the shadows.

Returning his attention to the lady on the other side of the grate, his mouth mechanically delivered another prescription for penance. Again, the second door closed. The silver pectoral cross that hung absently around his neck thumped against Father Dominic's hollow chest, in rhythm with his muffled sobs that were absorbed by the wooden walls of the Confessional. Through the gaps between the velvet curtain and the booth's window to the right of his head, orange rays of the early afternoon sun were suspended in the particles of dust that hung in the air. He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

It felt like hours before Father Dominic awoke to a knocking on the Confessional door. The rapping knuckles belonged to Grace Garcia, Blessed Sacrament's bookkeeper. After a moment she opened the door and

leaned lightly in the archway. Looking down at the sleepy priest she asked, "Falling asleep in the Confessional again, are we Father?"

Father Dominic's eyelids fluttered open, he rolled his neck from side to side, and stretched his spine into a cat-like arch. If anyone else had discovered him, especially that obnoxious Sunday School teacher Mrs. Krum, he would have just brushed off the blush of his embarrassment. But it was sweet Grace standing in front of him. She never failed to put a smile on his face, even when she complained about her mother-in-law and worried about her son struggling with fractions. She was always so patient with him, even during one of his spells. Perhaps it was because she saw already what Father Dominic didn't have the heart to tell her, or anybody else for that matter. He at least held on to the impression that the other parishioners had not yet caught on to his changing condition. Or maybe they did, but they refused to accept that the keeper of their faith could ever evade God's heavenly protection.

There was just something about Grace that being called, "Father," felt a little more special coming from her. Maybe it was the way her nose crinkled when she read the newspaper, the same way Dominic's did. Maybe it was how one giggle blossomed into a laugh that cast sunshine to those around her, just like Linda did. Grace was like the daughter he never had. Linda ripped the chance right out of his hands.

He felt the corners of his mouth starting to droop, so he quickly switched gears. "Aren't we a little nagging this afternoon? Save it for that plumber who hasn't fixed your upstairs toilet yet."

Grace rolled her eyes. "Please, you sound just like Michael."

"Well, your husband's a smart man." He popped his knuckles, then his back. "Now, what is so important, child, that you felt the need to interrupt my nap?"

"You have some visitors in your office, Father. Rachel Williams and Jack Callahan. They're here for their last Pre-Cana meeting."

At once an image of an eager brown-haired couple came to mind, though their faces were slightly out of focus. Father Dominic scratched his head and felt the prickly mixture of dry skin and dandruff lightly salt the shoulders of his cassock. "Glory be, I'd completely forgotten." In his haste to get to his office, he quickly pushed up from the wooden bench to get out of the booth. But he misjudged the last step, tripped, and fell onto his hands and knees.

Father Dominic cursed. Grace did not say a word. She only placed her delicate hands around his arms and helped him stand. Father Dominic cursed that word, *forgotten*.

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Dawn greeted the absent sun on the following Saturday morning that bled all the way into the early evening for the Williams-Callahan wedding. Guests packed into the pews, and as they huddled together there was a sense of collective thawing under the warmth of excited murmurs and anxious rustling. Meanwhile, Father Dominic secluded himself in the dark, damp, hermetic sacristy. He washed his hands and polished the chalice. He unfolded small linens, after discovering them in the cabinet where the oils were kept. He must have put them there after yesterday's mass. The silence breathed frigid air down his neck. It taunted, dared him to make a mistake. He floundered through the preliminary prayers. He felt as though the words were safely locked in a bureau in the back of his mind, but someone hid the key from him.

Is it you Linda? You and your games.

Faint laughter slipped in under the crack of the door from the hallway. The altar boys, Johnny and Patrick, were restless. He told them to get to work and handed them the chalice and linens for the mass.

He opened several doors until he reached the right one under the vesting table and produced a reptilian green vestment, just one among many sets of colorful skins. He shed one for another at the whim of the liturgical calendar, whose dates were never the same year to year. He felt like an imitation, fraudulent and ashamed. After dressing, Father Dominic dipped his scaly fingertips into the font. Holy water glistened and transferred feebly to his wrinkled forehead, then his chest, then each shoulder. That much had permeated his muscle memory, something not even God could control.

With a deep breath and passive nod of the head, he turned on his heel to walk out of the room. But something hooked him in the pit of his stomach, spun him back around and yanked his upper body toward the oatmeal-colored carpet. It pillaged his stomach, replicating a sensation of perpetual motion sickness. It kept on thrusting him under Christ's disappointed gaze from the Crucifix hanging on the wall.

After pulling himself together, Father Dominic left the sacristy and made his way to the altar. It was perfumed with the fragrance of freshly cut gardenias and peonies. He lifted his hands and the guests obediently arose from their seats. Little ones stretched as far as they could on the tips of their toes while the adults simply turned their necks to watch the bride join her future husband at the end of the aisle. At once the string ensemble awakened their instruments to begin the familiar chords of Pachelbel's Canon in D Major.

Vibrant refracted light from the stained-glass window swaddled Father Dominic's plump face. Underneath his weary smile a disinterested

yawn begged to be released. But he couldn't blink. Like a camera shutter, he knew that an insignificant open and close of his eyelids would engrain this vision into memory, right alongside the day he took his own vows to Christ. Memory had become a valuable currency that he couldn't afford to spend on another empty one. For three decades, the image of his priestly rite had resided steadfastly at the forefront of his brain, although in recent years it had started to blur and wander listlessly in the periphery of grey matter.

As he looked on at the young couple before him, he did not think of the day he received the sacrament of Holy Orders. He did not think of the allure of the earthly chrism. He did not think of the bishop's hands conferring onto him the power of the Holy Spirit. He did think of a woman with golden hair and round eyes whom he had known when he was just Dominic.

The strings died out into a faint cacophony in the back of his head as he wandered back to Linda. Again, the young blonde woman crystallized before him in his mind's eye. He transcended back to the day he almost received the sacrament he truly wanted. Linda's feet barely touched the marbled tile, floating under cascading layers of ivory lace and taffeta that hugged her bodice and coalesced behind her. A pair of small hands blossomed from slender arms padded with puffy sleeves. They held tightly to a bouquet of roses. As she approached the end of the aisle, as though reaching through silk, she extended her hand and let it fall, like a breeze.

As the memory faded, he tried to chase it, forlorn. Once more, Linda's hand slipped through Dominic's outstretched fingers as it had forty years ago. Once more, Father Dominic found himself standing alone at the altar. Once more, he felt a crackling in the shell.

In the aftermath of Linda's departure, he heard a calling to a higher power. At least, that's what he had believed at the time. Thinking that it would renew the fires of his faith, he followed the calling to the doorstep of the seminary. From then on, he was no longer just Dominic; he went on to proclaim the word of God to devoted followers whom he knew would never leave. He vowed to a life on the other side of the altar. He used to believe a lot of things when he was younger. Now he was choking on the smoke and ash of his regrets.

As the string quartet regained its original volume in Father Dominic's ears, he desperately ached to squirm under the starch of his white collar but remained stiff, as though a single misplaced scratch of the neck or swipe of the brow would disrupt the heavenly stillness and send shards of blue, green, and purple into the sanguine wedding guests. The

optimistic faces of the bride and groom triangulated with Father Dominic's: a perfect trinity. The priest took a deep breath. As the ambrosial, floral scent filled his lungs, he suppressed his lethargy to utter the first words of the rest of their lives.

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After saying the 7 a.m. mass the next day for the same collection of early-risers and never-sleepers, Father Dominic changed out of his vestments and left the church through the narthex. After checking the lock three times, he treaded a well-worn path just behind Blessed Sacrament to Rosemary Memorial Gardens, where his mother was laid to rest three years ago. Over the years, however, he came to realize that the only part of the cemetery that was anything near garden-like were the haunted visages of overgrown mounds and tombstones.

Hands shoved deep in the pockets of his navy windbreaker, Father Dominic trudged through the milky fog, kicking stray gravel stones with the tips of his sneakers while the rest crunched underfoot. He finally arrived at his favorite bench, positioned just behind his mother's grave. The iron curves and crevices brooded in the bitter cold, trapped in a long-extended winter that craved for spring. On any other day he would settle in with a thermos of tea and talk to his mother. He would pour out the contents of his heart while absently plucking the petals off the flowers he meant to leave for her. But now, Father Dominic moved his eyes around the perimeter of the grave, not directly at it. He couldn't bear to look at his reflection in the ice cloaking her gravestone.

Three years ago, it felt unfamiliar to be just Dominic, not a messenger of God but a man burying his mother after she finally succumbed to the torrents of dementia.

Why would my God do something like this...to me?

He shivered and forced himself to look at anything else. Blades of grass yearned for dew drops but instead found themselves wrapped in a cocoon of frost. As the sun crept over the tree line, steam radiated from the ground as though the lifeless souls contained within were exhaling. Off in the close distance, a group of groundskeepers were busy digging a spot for the next resident, a new plant for the Gardens. As he watched in comfort the cadence of the rise and fall of the shovels, a cardinal, the color of fresh blood drawn from a thorny rose, landed on a vacant branch near Father Dominic's head. It mocked him with song.

"Good morning, Father." There she was again, snapping him out of a dream.

Father Dominic rubbed the corners of his freshly misted eyes. "Hello, Grace. Here to visit Michael's brother?"

“Yes, he’s over there now. I wanted to give him some space.” She wiggled her way into the empty space on the bench. They sat shoulder to shoulder. Grace gazed out over the Gardens in the direction of her husband, lingered a moment, and then looked back at Father Dominic, whose head had fallen into his hands. “Father, what’s wrong?”

He felt a stirring at the bottom of his heart. He lifted his head. When he did, he caught a glimpse of his eyes staring back at him in the icy mirror. The familiar hazel was gone, masked by shadows and unbearable cold.

“I’m terrified. Ever since my mom died, I can’t help but feel myself slipping down the same path. I give mass to the parishioners, some of whom I’ve known ten years. Their faces are completely blurred. Sometimes I even fumble through the Our Father. All the time I help these young couples, families and their children, and I feel cheated. Cheated out of the life that I really wanted. And now,” he choked, “I’m finding it harder and harder to justify staying with a vocation that I don’t really believe in.”

Grace swiped away a tear with a pink-painted fingertip. Resting her hand on Father Dominic’s shoulder, she opened her mouth to issue some kind of consolation.

But Father Dominic spoke first. “I love you, Linda.”

Her hand jerked back. “W-what did you say?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I love you! Why did you leave me at the altar?”

This time she didn’t hide her tears. “Father? It’s me, Grace. Who is Linda?”

Realizing his mistake, he tried to spit out an apology, but only managed to stumble over a few broken syllables interrupted with coughs. Grace’s green almond eyes blinked a Morse code of forgiveness and understanding. Father Dominic mustered a congested goodbye to Grace and told her to say hello to her husband for him.

Dominic returned to Blessed Sacrament to grab his car keys and drove to Matthew’s Diner a quarter mile up the road. He left his windbreaker on the rack and settled into a booth tucked in the back of the restaurant. As he waited for his coffee, Dominic drummed his fingers on the tabletop, adjusted his position on the squeaky blue plastic cushion, and leaned his head against the wooden back of the booth. Light from the yellow lamp shade warmed the crown of his head and parted faint clouds of dust. Something started crawling up the back of his throat. He welcomed the yawn like an old friend and slipped into the shadows.

**Content Warning: Depictions of depression*



As a writer, I have learned to seek out inspiration from anything and everything. My greatest sources of inspiration come from nature, history, and my own personal passions. I hope that the readers can find me there as the ink on the page and forever between the lines.

I have a constant desire to express my thoughts and emotions. Writing, for me, satisfies this need and is exciting and liberating, so much so that I have deemed myself a storyteller by trade with the utmost respect for details. I have a great deal to say, and 24 hours in a day is simply too short to spill my mind's contents. So, I turn to writing, where pen and paper are my loyal audience, all ears and anxious to listen.

